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**Meds**

# Mount Vernon Fruit Cake

By William J. Moyer

**C**HRISTMAS at Mount Vernon in Washington's day was a festive occasion. There were imported toys for the children, gay rounds of social visits after services at the old Pohick Church and, in keeping with tradition that is still observed, bounteous meals for the family, visitors and servants.

Martha Washington was a skilled and meticulous plantation mistress. She kept careful records and her Christmas menus gave her own recipes for capon stuffed with oysters, roast veal with herb dressing, pies, and last, but far from least, "great cake."

It was a king-sized cake filled with various fruits and, as proof that Mrs. Washington had to take quality as well as quantity into consideration, the original recipe called for 40 eggs.

But, fortunately, for those who have not already arranged for their Christmas fruit cake, the recipe can be divided by any denominator of 40 and there still is plenty of time to make it. Unlike a fruit cake that must be given time to "ripen," the great cake can be eaten as soon as it cools. In fact, it is more a fruit-filled pound cake than the commonly-known fruit cake.

Mrs. Olive Bailey, wife of Worth Bailey, curator at Mount Vernon, has baked it a number of times. Here is how she divides the recipe: One-half pound butter, 5 eggs, 1 cup sugar, 2¼ cups flour, 3 tablespoons sherry wine, 3 tablespoons brandy, ½ teaspoon mace, ¼ teaspoon nutmeg, raisins, currants, figs, dates, lemon and orange peel and citron. The peel should be candied or fresh peel cut into small pieces and soaked overnight in wine.

First, Mrs. Bailey softens the butter and stirs into it the frothily beaten whites of the eggs, tablespoon by tablespoon. Then she adds the sugar in the same manner, slowly adds the beaten egg yolks followed by the flour which has been sifted three times. The wine, brandy, mace and nutmeg are added. She then stirs in as much fruit, equally proportioned, as the batter will hold.

She bakes the cake for an hour and a half at 275 to 300 degrees in a heavy 18th century crockery mold. In a thin aluminum cake mold it will, of course, bake much faster. The old-fashioned "broom straw" test can be used to determine when it is done.

After the cake is baked, Mrs. Bailey recommends placing it, wrapped in cloth, in an air-tight container, keeping the cloth wet with sherry. Or if you prefer, a small glass of sherry can be set in the hole in the center. She also recommends that it be baked a few days (but not longer than a week) before being served.



Worth Bailey, curator at Mount Vernon, samples a piece of fruit cake his wife made according to a recipe of Martha Washington.



Ingredients and recipe at hand, Mrs. Bailey begins to mix the cake. Because it is an old-fashioned cake, she prefers to mix it in the old-fashioned way—by hand.



The flour is sifted three times.



When the batter is nearly ready, the brandy is added.



In equal proportions, the fruit is put in last.